

OFF-BROADWAY

“Betty & The Belrays”—Music Meets Race!



By Ernece B. Kelly
Drama Critic

“I want to be a Negro,” Betty (Paulina Breeze) confesses, without irony or humor, to her confused parents, Joe (John Michael Hersey) and Mary Befarosky (Gretchen Poole), working class, white Detroiters in the 90 minute musical, “Betty & The Belrays.” It’s 1963 and Betty, just graduated from the all-white Immaculata High School, has no idea what to do with the rest of her life.

But she likes Negro music, listens to it on WXYZ, and learns from the D.J., Sam The Beat (the veteran actor Levern Williams in a juicy role) that she’s won tickets to see her favorite group, Lovejones. But to pick them up, Betty has to travel to the Negro side of Detroit. Afraid for her safety, her friends—white, of course—from high school, Zipgun (Alex Welch) and Connie (Kalia Lay) follow to protect her!

Once Betty meets her idol, the popular Negro Singer Joy Jones (Alexis Myles), she wants to audition for Soul Town Records too, but it only signs Black artists. And their talent scout happens to be Joy’s mother, Loretta (Aigner Mizzelle) who does a show-stopping turn



The Lovejoys help Betty prepare (L-R) Alexis Myles, Paulina Breeze, Kennedy Jazz and Alexis Miles (Photo: Jonathan Slaff)

advising the three lost souls to come back with irons and ironing boards saying, “You can sing anytime. But not anyone can iron!”

And that’s the set-up for this very funny, thoroughly integrated, well-acted, imaginatively staged musical written and directed by William Electric Black who here takes a detour from the serious dramas centering on urban gun violence he’s known for. No, he hasn’t abandoned racial issues, here he embeds them in music and humor.

For instance, Miss Loretta (as the white girls call her) establishes that Betty, Zipgun and Connie don’t even know any Negroes and asks if they ever heard of Rosa Parks or Charles Richard Drew. The answer’s “No” and the point made that while they love Negro music, they remain ignorant of Negro experiences and culture. (At one point she says, “You don’t even know how to get to the Negro neighborhood.” Adding, “And don’t know any Negroes to ask directions!” They can’t disagree.)

But Playwright Black hasn’t forgotten the conventional expectations for musicals, and he delivers. There’s terrific choreography and movement—utilizing the entire house, the ensemble goes up and down the aisles during several songs (kudos to Choreographer Jeremy Lardieri)—and Helen Hemley’s costume designs are consistently apt—eye-catching for the dancers and convincing for Betty’s working class family and friends.

Set Designer Lytza R. Colon has created an ingenious envi-

ronment that easily accommodates trios, back-up singers, ensemble dancing—we’re talking 14 of them!—a disc jockey, a kitchen, even an outdoor scene with a minimalist touch.

“Betty & The Belrays” succeeds in seamlessly combining social commentary with music, dance, and fine acting. First performed in 2007, with a few rewrites here and there, it would do well on Broadway. **“Betty & The Belrays” is at Theater for the New City on the Lower East Side thru February 17th.**

“Whirlwind”: A Well-Acted Play

By Ernece B. Kelly

“Whirlwind,” a tightly woven, well-acted play—it’s actually brief skits hooked together—takes on the serious subject of second generation responses to climate change with humor and generous doses of satire.

Opening with Beth (Annapurna Sriram) standing center stage listening to a podcast—it’s audible so the audience can listen in—giving instructions about smiling.

Our curiosity is piqued. Why would this attractive woman need this advice? (We get our answer in the closing moments of the play.)

Beth’s session is interrupted by the boss Cooper (Johnny Wu) explaining that he named his company ARROW because it “Aims to solve the problem.” Oozing confidence, he nonetheless stammers and stutters through a request that she meet with a “disgruntled bird guy” Michael (Christian Conn). We eventually learn the roots of Cooper’s discomfort and the

historical reasons for Michel’s annoyance.

It’s an obvious set-up for a romantic triangle, and sure enough, it materializes in the next scene when Beth and Michael meet to discuss their different views on the environment, but end up hurling insults. She calls him and his National Bird Defense League a “Bird Mafia”! He calls her a “Bird Nazi”! Yet only seconds later, they’re enjoying one another’s company.

From this juncture on, “Whirlwind” rides smoothly

on the dual-rails of romance and the issue of wind power. Michel’s distress leads him to take extreme measures—Cooper admits his romantic view of wind turbines which not-so-coincidentally supports his business model—and Beth evolves into a confident, independent, socially-involved businesswoman. All this within 90 minutes!

Playwright Jordan Jaffe’s well written satire is confidently handled by Director Dan Amboyer. Technical matters such as David A.

Sexton’s lighting design—plunging the stage into total darkness—assists Gabriel Firestone’s numerous scene changes. But outstanding is Matthew Fischer’s sound design which includes the thrum of turbines, the hoots of an owl and Beth’s podcast. Brilliantly balancing humor and weightiness, the eco-comedy, “Whirlwind” is a dizzying romp into the pros and cons of wind power. **“Whirlwind” performed at The Wild Project on Manhattan’s Lower East Side.**